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Family backgrounds of rural youth are discussed. The background provided by the family has implications for the adjustment of rural youth in an urbanized, highly technical society. The basic ecological conditions of rural areas influence the rate of social change, the importance of the family as a social unit, and the orientation toward legal regulations. Rural families tend to be lower in income and educational achievement than urban families.

It is necessary to make distinctions among rural families to bring out important family background factors of rural youth. Distinctions should be made on the basis of residence, social class, and race. Commercial farm families are successful in agriculture; level of aspiration is high and education is valued. Subsistence farm families are not successful in agriculture, for they have not adopted the business orientation to farming. Level of aspiration is low, education is not valued, and dropouts are common. In the commuter family, the father is away from the home during most of the children's waking hours; such homes tend to be mother-centered and may socialize children for lower middle class positions. The nonwhite family is an outcast family among a white majority. The pressures on and the isolation of these outcast people often lead to underachievement and failure.

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FAMILY BACKGROUNDS OF RURAL YOUTH

by

James H. Copp
Pennsylvania State University

U. S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION AND WELFARE
Office of Education

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National Committee for Children and Youth
1145 Nineteenth Street, N. W.
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THE CENTER FOR CULTURAL STUDIES
Adams State College of Colorado
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James H. Copp
Pennsylvania State University

Prepared for

The National Conference on Problems of Rural Youth
in a Changing Environment

September 1963

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FAMILY BACKGROUNDS OF RURAL YOUTH

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ABSTRACT

The background provided by the family has implications for the adjustment of rural youth in an urbanized, highly technical society. The basic ecological conditions of rural areas influence the rate of social change, the importance of the family as a social unit, and the orientation toward legal regulations. Furthermore, rural families tend to be lower in income and educational achievement than urban families. Beyond these general observations, it is necessary to make distinctions among rural families on the basis of residence, social class, and race in order to establish valid connections between the family background and the achievements of young people from rural areas.

FAMILY BACKGROUNDS OF RURAL YOUTH

Given the broad ambiguity of the word "rural" and the suprising paucity of research literature on the rural family, I feel my paper is less a summary of what is known than a prospectus for research in a very important area. 1/ Even though one wishes one could be more specific in detailing the consequences of the rural family matrix for its youth, there are certain general and important observations that one can make about the family situation of those 54 million people who are technically defined as "rural." 2/

COMMON CHARACTERISTICS OF RURAL FAMILIES

Possibly the most important observation one can make about the family backgrounds of close to one-third of the nation's youth is the great diversity of environments encompassed in the term "rural." 3/ Rural does not necessarily mean farm; only a quarter of the people living in rural areas are truly farm people. The remainder of the people are living in small towns, villages, hamlets, residential subdivisions or isolated dwellings scattered throughout the open country. To make things worse, we shall have to make distinctions between families living on large commercial farms and families living on small-scale subsistence farms not to mention distinctions among the families not living on farms. Finally, we shall have to make distinctions with regard to race; about one-tenth of the rural families in the United States are non-white. 4/ In other words, there is no such thing as "the rural family," but there are rural families differing in social class, residence, and race.

Despite this great diversity, most rural families share certain common characteristics. They live in more isolated, less densely populated areas. They live in areas of relative population decline. 5/ The pace of life is a little more leisurely and traditional orientations persist longer than in the city. People have less knowledge and experience with urban job markets and occupational structures. Levels of income and educational attainment are lower. In other words, youth from such communities are less well fitted for successful competition in our modern, urbanized society than their urban counterparts.

ALLEDGED RURAL VIRTUES

Before developing the details of this argument, I would like to take a moment to discuss the raw material, the rural youth themselves. There is still a good deal of latent sentiment favoring the superiority of country youth, physically and morally. One still hears the argument that our rural population should be protected because of certain values and genetic traits which rural people are supposed to possess.

There is no clear-cut evidence that rural people are physically and mentally superior to urban people. In fact, there is damaging evidence in the opposite direction. Perhaps the greatest shock to the notion of rural physical superiority occurred during World War II, when it was discovered that the proportion of Selective Service rejections for physical and mental deficiencies was higher in rural than urban areas. Other studies have pointed to the higher proportion of unmet medical and dental needs among rural people. 6/ Measures

of intelligence typically show country children to have lower I. Q.'s than urban children. 7/ Admittedly the intelligence tests are culture-bound, but they are biassed toward the culture in which the rural child will have to compete in adult life.

Also, there seems to be little evidence that country families are producing youth whose occupational achievement matches that of urban-reared youth. The evidence seems to point in the opposite direction. Here it should be pointed out that farm youth handicap their occupational achievement by not foreseeing nonagricultural employment. 8/ Furthermore, some of the qualities alleged to be more prevalent among rural youth, such as "thrift" and "hard work" are less appropriate for mobility in our contemporary urban industrial society than they were a century ago.

Be that as it may, there seems to be a stereotype of the rural character. The rural person is often portrayed as something of a "noble savage." He is portrayed as hard working, honest, thrifty, prudent, temperate, God-fearing, etc. However, the sturdy yeoman is only one type of rural personality--the type most likely to succeed in the nineteenth century urban world. There have always been other types of families in rural areas. There has always been and there still is the dull, the shiftless, the immoral, the irreligious rural person. These other types of people failed to produce descendants who went to college and wrote books about our rural heritage.

Thus the rural family has been selectively portrayed by the people from the "good" families. The New Englander, the Southern yeoman, and the Midwestern entrepreneur have been portrayed as the typical rural person. Chances are his family had very little contact with the Snopeses, the folks on Tobacco Road or the Shantytown dwellers. These other types of people were not socially real to the people who staffed the communication system and reported on rural life. The sturdy yeoman farmer and his kin are still found in great numbers in rural areas and continue to make an invaluable contribution to rural society. The only point I wish to make is that there are other, less apparent, though very numerous, types of rural families with which we also should be concerned. In fact, if the yeoman farm families were the only kind of rural people we had, there would be little need for this conference.

IMPLICATION FOR RURAL YOUTH

Several of the features generally common to rural families deserve more detailed discussion. One of these is the greater spatial isolation and relatively low population density characteristics of rural areas. These circumstances mean that the rural person is a little harder to reach from the communication and power centers. Because of this basic ecological condition, rural areas have generally lagged in terms of the great societal changes which have taken place in history. There are other consequences, too. Rural areas have tended to be inadequately serviced in terms of medical care and education. In many rural-urban comparisons rural areas are inferior because of the greater cost of providing services to a less compactly settled population.

The low population density of rural areas leads to another interesting

consequence for the social life of rural youth. There are fewer opportunities for spontaneous interaction within walking distance. Less of the rural youth's time is spent with the peer group gang. On farms the daytime hours are spent in work. The work emphasis also seems to be strong among nonfarm adolescents. Spatial isolation and low density of homes means that the automobile is more important and indispensable for the peer group activity of rural youth.

Because of reduced contact with outsiders, the close association of work and residence, and the allocation of work among family members, rural families have often been characterized as familistic. The importance of this trait among American rural families has probably been exaggerated. Recently, a considerable amount of familism has been rediscovered in urban areas. 9/ It still seems to be true, however, that rural people are more familistic. 10/ Familism can be an important deterrent to migration to places of better job opportunities, for both urban and rural people. 11/

There is another characteristic rural feature which a low population density permits. Rural people are less hedged in by legal rules and regulations. The difference becomes apparent when a rural area becomes suburbanized and people are forced to adopt street lights, paved roads, zoning, sewerage, and speed limits. The rural person is freer from the restrictions framing our modern urban way of life. The rural youth is socialized in an environment controlled more by how the neighbors will react than by what the regulations say. Thus the rural youth is less prepared and less sympathetic with the fine points of our regulated society. 12/

Another general observation we can make about the rural population is that it tends to be a low income population. The current income for farm families is only a little more than half that for nonfarm families. 13/ Nonwhite farm families have a median income which is less than half that of white farm families. Rural nonfarm families also have lower median incomes than urban families--in general, it is about three quarters as large as urban income. 14/ Not only are incomes lower, but families are larger. 15/ In other words, rural youth grow up in family environments where income levels are limited and material levels of living are at a lower scale than the average for urban areas. The rural youth tends to be socialized as a low income person.

Given the foregoing two characteristics of rural families discussed above, disadvantages of location and income, a third characteristic emerges as a consequence--rural areas are characteristically areas of static or declining population. They are areas showing a net out-migration; more people move out than move into these areas. The fact that the residents of these areas tend to be old-timers and that few new people come in leads to a number of interesting social and psychological consequences. 16/

Given low in-migration, even though out-migration may be high, the people who remain tend to become more and more related to each other. Certain surnames tend to predominate. Community schisms may develop along kinship lines. Low in-migration places the kinship group in a more powerful position than in areas where there is high in-migration.

Another consequence of low in-migration is that the values of the elders are less frequently challenged. Old ideas are not exposed to the questioning of newcomers because there are no newcomers. It is possible that the young people who stay in rural areas find little objectionable in traditional views--they can live with it; perhaps the people who can't are the ones who leave. Actually we don't know, only careful research can give us the answer. 17/

A third consequence of a net loss in migration in a community is psychological. The dominant emotional tone tends to become pessimistic and backward-looking as trade centers decline and the young people leave. A sense of defeatism and alienation tends to pervade the community. The interest in community improvement lessens. People perceive that the forces for change are out of their hands. This anomic situation seems to hold in many of our communities today. The strength of social control seems to be weakening. The remaining families, the Snopes, may fill in the power vacuum left by the migration of the elite or the unwillingness of the elite to serve in positions of community responsibility.

Another important attribute shared by most rural families is a Protestant tradition. This does not mean that our rural people are church people--only about half of them are. People in villages are more often church people than those on farms. Women are more often members than men. Attachment to the church is to a local neighborhood institution rather than to a denomination or larger entity. 18/

Religious beliefs tend to be fundamental, church organization democratic, and outlets emotional. American rural religion is best characterized as evangelical rather than puritanical. 19/ The Sunday School, the Bible, and personal experience and feeling are important elements in this natural, pragmatic theology. 20/

On the other hand, rural religion is often a matter of form, of what not to do--no drinking, cursing, Sunday movies, Sabbath labor, smoking, wenching or stealing. The deterrent influence of rural religion helps youth avoid temptations, work diligently, perservere, and possibly make good, to a limited extent. But on the other hand, much rural religion leads to a rigid, non-creative, static orientation to life--a religion of the home folks.

Furthermore, the more expressive forms of religion may help the person humbly accept the status quo rather than strive for mobility. In this way traditional rural religion may be a deterrent to the optimum adjustment of rural youth in nonagricultural systems.

Another general cultural characteristic shared by rural families is a low level of formal educational attainment. Adult males living in rural areas have, on the average, about two years less formal education than adult males in urban areas. 21/ The women have slightly more schooling, but a similar differential persists. Thus the amount and the quality of education is a handicap shared by rural families in the competition for nonagricultural jobs. Furthermore, the average cultural level in the homes tends to be impoverished. Reading matter is scarce and of an extremely popular level. The daily local

newspaper or the country weekly, the mail order catalog, and the farm papers are the most common reading matter. Thus, the culture of contemporary society is mediated largely through the ubiquitous television set.

TYPES OF RURAL FAMILIES

So much for general considerations. From here on it will be necessary to talk about types of families in order to bring out important family background factors of rural youth. As pointed out earlier, distinctions should be made on the basis of residence, class, and race. For very broad purposes the following types of families may be discussed: the commercial farm family, the subsistence farm family, the village proprietor family, the commuter family, and the nonwhite family. This typology of rural families is not systematic, but it will serve as a framework for bringing out the differing implications various types of family background have for rural youth.

COMMERCIAL FARM FAMILIES

Let us first consider the commerical farm family. There are somewhat over a million of these families. 22/ This type exemplifies the contemporary version of the sturdy yeoman: it is the stereotype rural family, and represents the embodiment of the family farm, so hallowed in American farm policy. It is also a minority type among rural families even among farm families. But it is the type of family most likely to provide a background for youth to succeed at farming or in nonagricultural pursuits. In this type of family the orientation toward farming is technical or even professional, an orientation that also may be easily transferred to other occupational pursuits. It is from these families that 4-H members are recruited. It is from these families that the "outstanding rural youth", who win honors and publicity in the agricultural press, generally come.

The educational and cultural level in these families is high. Income may be lower than for many nonagricultural occupations, but there is a strong upwardly mobile thrust. These family backgrounds build in a high level of aspiration. The next generation of farmers will be recruited from this group. Children in these families finish high school and a good proportion go on to college. But many, perhaps over three-quarters, will enter nonfarm occupations where they will do well because of the anticipatory socialization to middle class values in the home. The high value placed on education by the parents generally will lead to adequate training for high status nonagricultural positions.

SUBSISTANCE FARM FAMILIES

There is another type of farm family that is not succeeding at agriculture. The census classifies this type of farmer as a subsistence farmer, but many farmers above this level also are operating at an uneconomical scale. These are low-income farmers. These farm families have not adopted the business orientation to farming: some because of the hold of traditional orientations, while others are proletariat disguised as entrepreneurs. Level of aspiration is often quite low. Education is not valued, and drop-outs are common. The

children in these families are low participators in youth organizations. Income levels are so low that the youth generally do not stay on the farm but take low status nonfarm jobs. This type of family background provides the rural working class, the cultural type portrayed in "country music." The family background does not prepare the youth for successful competition in contemporary occupational structures. This background restricts youth to those occupational levels where the number of jobs is not expanding. 23/

VILLAGE BUSINESS AND PROFESSIONAL FAMILIES

Another type of rural family is rather small in numbers, but significant in providing orientations for its youth to succeed. These are the families of village proprietors, managers, and professional men. These families have a rational orientation to their occupation. The status of the family in the village community is an important consideration. Qualities valued because they enhance community status, also provide a matrix for success elsewhere in our society. Like those from commercial farm families the children of such families do not necessarily stay in the family business. But like children from commercial farm families, their record of achievement is good elsewhere.

COMMUTER FAMILIES

The next heuristic type of rural family is the commuter family. This has become the predominant type of rural family. The place of work and the place of residence are widely separated. The worker may spend an hour or more going to work and a similar amount of time returning. Status at the place of work has less influence on status in the community because competence at work is invisible to the community. Status in the community is based more on repute, expressive characteristics, and participation in community affairs.

This type of family is the rural working class. Often quality of housing may be higher than the level of occupation. As Schnore points out commuters trade the inconvenience of commuting for a better level of housing. 24/

Because the father is away from the home during most of the children's waking hours, such homes tend to be mother-centered. The young mother is often a captive in her own home. If employment is steady and income is high, such rural working class homes may socialize children for lower middle class positions.

NONWHITE FAMILIES

The last type of rural family discussed is not one type of family; it is many. We refer to the nonwhite family. About three million nonwhites are living on farms and another two and one-half million are living in other rural areas. Income levels in these families are very low, half that of comparable white families, even though nonwhite families are up to a third larger in size. Education levels are about two years lower than for comparable whites. Families are more unstable. 25/

The nonwhite family is an outcast family living among a white majority. Prejudice and discrimination are everyday realities everywhere in this country.

For example, rural Negro families from the South have been migrating to the North to find they have exchanged de juro segregation for de facto discrimination and segregation. We know very little about rural nonwhite families. It would seem reasonable to assume that the pressures on and the isolation of an outcast people would lead to accommodations that would not contribute to the success of youth in our urban technological society.

SUMMARY

These, then, are some very general observations about the rural family. There is no one typical or modal type. There is no great fund of knowledge about this social unit or, rather, set of social units. Thus, I have been restricted in this paper to rather general statements, lacking detailed research support. It is to be hoped that this conference will dramatize the need for intensive research designed to establish the connection between the rural family matrix and the fate of rural youth in an urbanized, technological society.

FOOTNOTES

1. Although there has been much research on marriage and the family, comparatively little attention has been given to the family as a social unit. This is particularly true for rural families. An outstanding example of the kind of research needed is James S. Brown's studies of The Farm Family in a Kentucky Mountain Neighborhood and The Family Group in a Kentucky Mountain Farming Community. Kentucky Agriculture Experiment Station Bulletins 587 and 588, respectively, Lexington, 1952.

2. The 1960 U. S. Census of Population reported 54,054,425 people as rural. The Bureau of the Census classifies that part of the population rural which lives in places of less than 2,500 persons and beyond the compactly built-up areas surrounding our large cities. U. S. Bureau of the Census, U. S. Census of the Population: 1960, Vol. I, Characteristics of the Population, Part A, Number of Inhabitants, Washington, D. C., 1961, p. xii.

3. In April, 1962, the farm population was estimated to be 14.3 million, a decline of 1.3 million since 1960. U. S. Bureau of the Census, "Estimates of the Farm Population of the United States, April 1962." Series Census - ERS (P-27), No. 33, Washington, 1963.

4. In 1960 the U. S. Census reported 6.05 million nonwhite persons living in rural areas. The rural Negro population is expected to continue to rapidly decline through migration to urban areas. U. S. Bureau of the Census. U. S. Census of Population: 1960. Detailed Characteristics, United States Summary. Final Report PC(1)-1D. Washington, D. C., 1963, p. 360.

5. From 1950 to 1960, the rural population declined by 0.8 percent, while the population in urban areas increased by 29.3 percent. Beale, Calvin L., and Donald J. Bogue. Recent Population Trends in the United States with Emphasis on Rural Areas. Agricultural Economic Report No. 23, Washington, D. C., U. S. Dept. of Agriculture, 1963, p. 12.

6. Loomis and Beegle summarize the present relative health of rural people as follows: "Despite the natural advantages of rural life, in many respects rural people in the United States are less healthy than urban. In general, the mortality statistics and draft rejection rates indicate that the advantages rural areas once had no longer exist or are disappearing. This condition is to be explained by the fact that with respect to personnel and prevention in the healing arts, the rural areas are disadvantaged when compared with the urban areas." Rural Social Systems, New York; Prentice-Hall, 1950, p. 760.

7. "The fact that country children as a group score distinctly below the norms on current intelligence tests has been repeatedly demonstrated. Numerous investigations, some employing several thousand children and covering practically complete school populations, have consistently revealed the inferior performance of rural children in all parts of the United States." Anastasi, Anne, and Foley, John P., Jr. Differential Psychology, New York, Macmillan, 1949, pp. 815-816.

8. Burchinal, Lee G., with Haller, Archibald O., and Taves, Marvin J. Career Choices of Rural Youth in a Changing Society. North Central Regional Publication No. 142, Minnesota Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin 458, St. Paul, 1962.

9. Sussman, Marvin B., and Burchinal, Lee G., "Kin Family Network: Unheralded Structure in Current Conceptualizations of Family Functioning." Marriage and Family Living, August, 1962, 24, 231-240. Sussman, Marvin B., and Burchinal, Lee G., "Parental Aid to Married Children: Implications for Family Functioning." Marriage and Family Living, November, 1962, 24, 320-332. Key, William H., "Rural-Urban Differences and the Family." Sociological Quarterly, January, 1961, 2, 49-56.

10. Heller, Peter L. Master's thesis in process, Pennsylvania State University. Heller finds that farm, village, small town, and urban students do differ significantly, and in that order, on a measure of familism, but that residence accounts for only a small fraction of the variation in familism. It is of interest to note that familism increases among Penn State students coming from Philadelphia and Pittsburgh.

11. Observations made during field work in a recent study in Pittsburgh and Allegheny County suggests that family ties and the accommodation of the wife to unemployment status are powerful deterrents to the migration of the unemployed, even when job opportunities are known to exist elsewhere.

12. Heasley, Daryl K. Residence and Related Positions Taken Toward Community Services in the Rural Urban Fringe: The Case of Buffalo Township, Pennsylvania. Unpublished master's thesis, Pennsylvania State University, 1962.

13. U. S. Bureau of the Census. "Income of Families and Persons in the United States; 1961" Current Population Reports, Series P-60, No. 39, Washington, D. C.: 1963, Table 9, p. 20.

14. U. S. Bureau of the Census. Census of Population: 1960, Detailed Characteristics. United States Summary, Table 225.

15. Ibid., Table 187. As degree of rurality increases, size of family increases; also there are one and one-half more members in the nonwhite rural farm family than in the nonwhite urban family.

16. This point is developed in Copp, James H. "The People in Town-Country Communities--Stable and Declining Communities." New Thousands in Town and Country, Chicago; National Lutheran Council, 1962, pp. 83-91.

17. Despite a large amount of spilled ink on "rural values," research has as yet failed to uncover distinctive values held by rural people, excepting valuation of the county as a place to live. For a recent comparison of supposedly rural values among rural, fringe, and urban samples see Tuttle, Dawn H. Rural-Urban Experience and Values in Rural, Fringe, and Urban Areas of Pennsylvania. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Pennsylvania State University, 1962. The Heasley thesis (op.cit.), on the other hand, suggests that even if rural and urban people are relatively similar in

values, they differ sharply in their characteristic styles for realizing those values.

18. Copp, op.cit., p. 90.

19. Hofstadter, Richard. Anti-intellectualism in American Life. New York; Knopf, 1963, Chapter III, "The Evangelical Spirit."

20. An excellent study of rural family life, religion, and the church is found in Whitman, Lauris B., and Lively, Anne O., A Study of Low-Income Farm Families in Two Southern Rural Communities, National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U. S. A. (c. 1958).

21. U. S. Bureau of the Census. Census of Population:1960. Detailed Characteristics. United States Summary, Table 173.

22. What I am referring to as "the commerical farm family" is more stringent than the Census of Agriculture's "commercial farm." I have in mind families connected with commercial farms of Classes I, II, and III, where value of products sold exceeds $10,000. There were 796,000 farms in Classes I, II, and III. I would also include many farms from Class IV, where value of products sold is between $5,000 and $10,000. There were 654,000 farms in Class IV in the last Census of Agriculture. U. S. Bureau of the Census, U. S. Census of Agriculture: 1959. Vol. II, General Report, Washington, D. C., 1962, Chapter XI, "Economic Class of Farm."

23. Manpower Report of the President as reported in "Technology in U. S. Found Outpacing Education and Human Resource Use." Washington Post, March 12, 1963, p. A7.

24. Schnore, Leo F. "The Separation of Home and Work: A Problem for Human Ecology," Social Forces, May, 1954, 32, 336-343.

25. U. S. Bureau of the Census. Census of Population: 1960. Detailed Characteristics. United States Summary, Table 176. There is about an 18 percentage-point spread between the percent of nonwhite and white persons married once with spouse present.

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